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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 WINDHOEK 000424

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL KDEM WA CH PA

SUBJECT: SWAPO DODGES CHINESE SCHOLARSHIP SCANDAL

REF: A. WINDHOEK 272

1B. WINDHOEK 118

1C. WINDHOEK 302

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Classified By: Ambassador Dennise Mathieu for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (U) Summary. For weeks, the Namibian government has been under pressure by the public, the media, and the political opposition to explain how the children of ten prominent government officials, including the president, were awarded coveted scholarships to study in China. Many Namibians, including some South West African People's Organization (SWAPO) supporters, are angry that the process was not transparent and that children of lower income families do not appear to have been considered for the scholarships. The Chinese Embassy has been forced to weigh in as well. Despite the fact that many are labeling this a case of corruption, the scandal will not likely dent SWAPO's support in the presidential and National Assembly elections. End summary.

A Chinese Gift

12. (U) On October 15, the weekly Informante newspaper reported that the children of high-ranking Government of Republic of Namibia (GRN) and SWAPO officials had received scholarships to attend undergraduate university programs in China. The children include: the daughter of President Pohamba, the daughter of the Deputy Minister of Lands and Resettlement, the son of the Police Inspector General, the son of the Minister of Defense, the son of the Deputy Minister of Mines and Energy, and a relative of former first lady Kovambo Nujoma. Some outlets reported that the daughter of the Minister of Justice and the son of the Minister of Home Affairs also benefited. Several of the aforementioned parents confirmed in the Informante article that their children departed Namibia in August to study in China on scholarships provided by the Chinese government.

13. (U) The Chinese scholarships story quickly became front page news. Pundits, opposition politicians, civil society and members of the public labeled it corruption and demanded that the government explain who had chosen the recipients, what selection criteria were used and whether the scholarships were publicly advertised. Norman Tjombe, the executive director of the respected Legal Assistance Center, summarized the criticisms in several opinion pieces, asking why the children of relatively affluent parents, all of them senior government officials, had received scholarships at the expense of poor, yet academically-qualified students.

¶14. (U) Minister of Education Nangolo Mbumba held a series of press conferences in late October and early November to dispel "fabricated, misleading, and politically motivated" reports on the scholarships. In them, Mbumba explained that there had been 22 Chinese scholarships in total, but that his ministry had been given only 10 scholarships by the Chinese government to award to Namibian youth. He claimed that the scholarships which had been given to the children of senior officials were awarded directly by the Chinese government. Mbumba was unsure of the selection criteria the Chinese had used, but he speculated that the Chinese Embassy had made the final decisions. He tried to assure the public that "You can't bribe someone with a bursary (scholarship)." He added, "It's not the ministers who are being sponsored by the Chinese." Mbumba went on to defend his colleagues, arguing none of them had requested such gifts nor tried to influence the selection process. In fact, he insisted, Pohamba's daughter had applied for the scholarship without her parents' knowledge.

¶15. (U) Mbumba said that China had offered 40 bursaries to Namibian students over the last three years, all in accordance with the GRN's education policy. He stated that the GRN has offered financial assistance to 35,000 Namibian students since 1997, 6,000 of which are being aided this year. Mbumba would not say how the government officials' children learned of the scholarships or whether the bursaries had been advertised.

¶16. (U) Notably, the fiercely loyal SWAPO Party Youth League (SPYL) questioned the government's honesty. On the SPYL

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website, SPYL Secretary Elijah Ngurare asked whether the Chinese government had attached strings to the scholarships for "future favors by our government" for the Chinese government itself or for Chinese companies seeking tenders in Namibia. His colleague Natangue Ithete called on the GRN to re-advertise the scholarships.

Chinese Response

¶17. (C) A Chinese embassy spokesman told journalists that the Chinese Ministry of Education had selected 14 students from 40 applications that were submitted through the Chinese Embassy. Yiming Zhang, the Deputy Chief of Mission, told Poloff that he and his colleagues were frustrated with the Namibian press in general and particularly on this issue. He believed the bursary story was politically-motivated and designed to make SWAPO look bad before the elections. Zhang claimed it was the Chinese universities accepting the students that had laid down the selection criteria. In addition, he defended the choices those institutions made, saying their decisions were based on merit and not financial need. "They chose the best students, not the poor students. We are not here to lift people out of poverty."

Conclusion

¶18. (C) Although the opposition has not been able to successfully keep SWAPO on the defensive during the campaign, several of the parties have managed to make government corruption a recurring election theme. In addition to the bursaries scandal, in September, SWAPO defended a Namibian dollar 2.5 million (USD 335,000) gift of campaign materials from the Pakistan Oshikango Welfare Association, an association of 11 companies owned by Pakistani permanent residents in Namibia. The opposition Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP) argued that the donation amounted to a bribe

and inappropriate foreign influence in domestic political activities (Note: In Namibia, foreign funding should be declared, but loopholes in electoral legislation mean parties are not obligated to do so. (ref A). End note.)

¶9. (C) The Chinese have a long history of making generous donations to the GRN and to SWAPO (ref B). This year, some of those loans and gifts have brought the Chinese government a strong dose of criticism and negative publicity (ref C). The scholarship case has particular resonance for civil society and the public because this is the first time a large segment of the "inner circle"-- as opposed to an individual-- is seen to be benefiting from a foreign gift-- and at the public's expense. Although many Namibians lament the growing Chinese influence in their country, the sentiment does not appear to be strong enough to damage the popular SWAPO's chances at the polls.

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